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A call for journalists in the Pacific to defend media freedom

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A former President of the Pacific Islands News Association has appealed to members to uphold the original reason for the formation of the organisation - to defend media freedom.

Monica Miller from American

Samoa who was on a panel

discussion at the Third Pacific Media Summit about the importance of tuna to Pacific Island countries began her address by saying too many media organisations had abandoned PINA and it was almost like a divorce.

Reporter: Sean Dorney, Australia Network's Pacific Correspondent

Speakers: Monica Miller, journalist in American Samoa and former head of the Pacific Islands News Association; Robert Matau, Islands Business magazine, based in Fiji; Lisa Williams-Lihari, Forum Fisheries Agency

DORNEY: Monica Miller from American Samoa led the Pacific Islands News Association for seven years in the days when PINA was the major champion of media freedom in the Pacific.

In her opening remarks to the session on reporting the Tuna Story, Monica Miller said the organisation these days no longer enjoyed the confidence of so many of its former members. She also made reference to a comment earlier in the conference by the Director of Fiji's Government appointed Media Industry Development Authority, Matai Akauola.

MILLER: Yes, as you have heard I used to be the Mother of PINA for many years - nobody else wanted the job so 'Let her do it!' So PINA is very important to me and I get emotional when I talk about PINA. And this is the first gathering of PINA I've attended in many, many years.

So it's been wonderful catching up with old colleagues, many of them now bosses, and also reflecting on the memories of colleagues who are no longer with us but who have left their mark and legacy in the Pacific media. And also of colleagues who have left PINA, the PINA family, in the belief that PINA no longer represents what the organisation was set up for.

But as Matai said, 'We're not wrong. We're doing things differently.' And while we can do things differently, PINA's mandate is enshrined in its constitution and - unless it is changed - protection of free speech and freedom of expression is in there.

As the present safeguards of media freedom: are we doing our duty and will the PINA we pass on to the next generation be one that we can be proud of? Or will we be the ones our replacements point to and say, 'It was when they were in charge that the association became fragmented!'

In divorce there is always the chance for the couple to settle their differences. While we don't want to dwell on the past we need to look at the causes of the breakup and fix them and make the marriage work again. And I want to be part of the fix-up team!

DORNEY: Whether there is an opportunity for a fix will be decided at today's Annual General Meeting of PINA. But the number of paid up members is a fraction of what it used to be. Monica Miller then turned her attention to the tuna story.

MILLER: So the fishing story is about jobs. It's about food, it's about revenue our Governments earn from the licences issued to foreign fishing boats to fish in our EEZ's. It's about the effects of all the fishing and how the fish that are caught in our waters is processed and packed in far away countries like Thailand and China and then comes back to us in a tin.

DORNEY: Another panelist, Robert Matau, from the Suva based Islands Business magazine has followed the tuna story closely. Robert's son is an engineer on a Fiji based tuna fishing boat which is facing a very uncertain future.

MATAU: We have the healthiest tuna stock in the world. There are other parts that have collapsed - there is no tuna in their oceans any more and they're trying to rehabilitate.

So the warnings are continuing. If we allow this indiscriminate fishing going on we'll also collapse, we'll lose our tuna. And other fish depend on the tuna family - it's a food chain. You know, if you let that one go it's a domino effect.

What other fish goes after that? What other fish will these Distant Fishing Nations come for? It's an important message that I'd like to share with you. And I feel too that this issue has been neglected.

DORNEY: There was a workshop preceding this Pacific Media Summit partly sponsored by the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency. The Agency's Media Officer, Lisa Williams-Lihari, read out some of the resolutions of that workshop group.

WILLIAMS-LAHARI: The Tunanomics Group said that we need to forge stronger partnerships with the regional fisheries organisations - the FFA, SPC and other RFMOs as they're know - I know it's full of acronyms - to help share more information in ways that help people properly engage with what is out there. And, of course, always to ensure that media have great access to the Pacific talking heads that we need to speak to when we share the tunanomics story.

DORNEY: Lisa Williams-Lihari from the Forum Fisheries Agency.

The Pacific Islands News Association's Annual General Meeting is on today. PINA is now an incorporated company registered in Fiji and I've been told the legal advice is that the current executive should not be changed.

So Monica Miller's offer to be part of the fix up team help PINA restore its support from a broader base of Pacific Media organisations may not be taken up. Sean Dorney, in Noumea for Pacific Beat.

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